

PAY TO PARK OR PAY THE PRICE



The Enquirer/Ernest Coleman

Angry drivers are part of the job for parking enforcement officers. David Rowland of Bond Hill confronted Laura Wathen on Central Avenue after he found a ticket on his car. **Story, A8**

Fines will catch up, unless you're from Ky.

By Gregory Korte
Enquirer staff writer

Cars parked on Cincinnati streets collected more than 98,000 parking tickets last year — mostly at expired meters, mostly downtown and usually around lunchtime.

But drivers beware: Officers also wrote tickets in neighborhoods, at all hours of the day, for infractions including expired plates, parking too far from the curb, even parking and leaving the keys in the ignition.

Nearly nine of every 10 drivers paid up, netting the city

more than \$2.6 million from fines that started at \$14 each.

Now, the stakes are higher.

Fines for three dozen parking violations increased Jan. 1, making parking an even more pressing problem for people who live, work, visit or shop in the city.

The fine for parking at an expired meter jumped from \$14 to \$25. Illegally parking in a handicapped space took the biggest jump — from \$56 to \$250.

The Enquirer analyzed the 98,243 parking tickets written last year. Among the trends:

■ Kentucky vi-

olators rarely pay anything at all, because the office responsible for collecting fines doesn't trace out-of-state license plates. That resulted in an out-of-state collection rate of just 2.5 percent, compared to 87.9 percent overall.

■ Ticket-writing spikes in the late morning hours, between 10 a.m. and noon. Before 9 a.m. and after 3 p.m. (after many officers have ended their shift) the odds of getting a ticket decrease.

■ Vehicle owners get more tickets on Thursday than any other day.

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CASE FOR APPEAL?

Think the meter was broken? You might win an appeal. **A8**

TOPS IN TICKETS

Councilman David Pepper is an expert on parking tickets: He got 27 last year. **A8**



THE TOUGHEST SPOT

You're most likely to get a ticket downtown on East Court Street, especially on a late Thursday morning. **More parking trivia, A8**

PAY TO PARK OR PAY THE PRICE

Parking: Costlier to let meters go hungry

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■ Parking at an expired meter is the most common violation. But the second-most common offense is one most motorists probably don't think about – parking with expired plates. No-parking signs, truck-loading zones and rush-hour lanes produced most of the remaining violations.

■ Drivers are most likely to get tickets in spots where parking is most in demand. Besides downtown, thousands of tickets were written in neighborhood business districts in Clifton, Clifton Heights, Hyde Park and Mount Lookout.

“You're going to get more tickets where the businesses are more prosperous,” said Ernie Byrd, the city's parking enforcement supervisor. “In Price Hill now, there are a lot of vacant storefronts.”

The number of tickets written may be a good measure of the vitality of a neighborhood. Vehicle owners received more tickets on Delta Avenue last year than on Glenway, Harrison, Queen City and Warsaw Avenues combined.

City officials say their primary goal is to keep parking spaces turning over so that customers can get to businesses.

“The business owner sometimes is the best parking attendant,” Byrd said.

His boss, Division of Parking Facilities Director Bob Schroer, insists that officers have no quotas and don't write tickets for picayune offenses. Ten civilian parking enforcement officers write about 60 percent of tickets, with the rest coming from police officers.

“Our officers will ticket you. They do not like writing tickets. But it's their job,” Schroer said. “They'd rather everyone plug the meter.”

Whatever the goal of the Parking Enforcement Bureau, City Council is counting on them to write tickets.

In an attempt to raise an additional \$573,250 a year, City Council increased parking fines across the board starting Jan. 1.

The city could collect another \$200,000 or more if it could get out-of-state drivers to pay.

Police and parking enforcement officers wrote 9,463 tickets to cars with out-of-state plates last year, amounting to \$249,869. But only 240 out-of-staters paid \$6,561 in tickets.

John Bain of Edgewood, Ky., is one of the honest ones.

“For \$25, I'll go ahead and pay it,” he said. “I'm worried that if I get another ticket and they run my plate, they could tow my car.”

Not necessarily. The Parking Enforcement Bureau relies on



The Enquirer/Ernest Coleman

Parking Enforcement Officer Laura Wathen writes a ticket along her route in downtown Cincinnati.

Yes, you can call her 'meter maid'

By Gregory Korte
Enquirer staff writer

Laura Wathen wrote 7,987 parking tickets last year – more than any other meter maid in Cincinnati last year.

And no, she doesn't mind when you call her a “meter maid.”

While her colleagues prefer the official job title – “parking enforcement officer” – Wathen is a big fan of the 1967 Beatles song.

“Other people don't like it, but I'm not offended at all. I actually have people say that to me on the street. ‘Hey, Lovely Rita!’”

It's a high point in a demanding and thankless job. In just 20 minutes of writing tickets downtown one recent Friday morning,

she wrote five tickets – and was confronted by the car's owner every single time.

The recipient of her first ticket was also the angriest. He chased her half a block down Central Avenue after his Mercury Sable got a \$40 ticket in front of a “No Parking Any Time” sign.

David Rowland, 22, of Bond Hill, had put his hazard lights on to drop off some telephone books at the Cincinnati Bell office.

“I'm not going to pay the ticket,” he said, tearing it up and throwing it to the ground. “They're going to have to send a warrant out for me.”

Wathen said she's learned to write fast and move on. It helps keep her warm on cold days, and

prevents confrontations. Sometimes, she has to radio for help. “The police will come back up, and they come quick,” she said.

Often, Wathen will go out of her way *not* to write a ticket.

She walked by cars with one minute left on the meter. She went door to door on Garfield Place to find the driver of a delivery truck blocking the sidewalk.

Parking officers do hear a good number of excuses.

“I hear everything,” said Stephanie Harlan. “I had one guy yesterday who said he had diarrhea and had to run in real quick. You don't get shocked by anything anymore.”

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Pepper's 27 tickets a costly pattern

By Gregory Korte
Enquirer staff writer

Councilman David Pepper knows a thing or two about parking tickets – and not just because he's chairman of the Law & Public Safety Committee.

Pepper received 27 parking tickets – and paid out \$1,088 in fines – in 2004 alone. He even had his car towed from outside City Hall in December, after a parking enforcement officer found several overdue, delinquent tickets on his Audi.

“I pay and I pay through the nose,” Pepper said, jokingly calling his tickets his “own personal deficit-reduction program.”

Pepper, a part-time associate at a downtown law firm and a full-time candidate for mayor, said a hectic schedule caused his frequent infractions.

Pepper ranked 11th in parking fines paid last year, according to an analysis of records at the Hamilton County Clerk of Courts. No other elected official came close.

It's not the number of tickets that puts him at the top. It's that he doesn't pay them right away. Ten of his 27 tickets were for \$72 – meaning a \$36 ticket (for parking in a truck zone, for example) doubled because he didn't pay it within seven days.

Indeed, truck loading zones and other prohibited areas – especially those outside his Walnut Street law office – seemed to give Pepper the most trouble.

Eight of Pepper's 27 tickets were near City Hall.

Despite all that, Pepper said, he's been working on proposals to make parking enforcement even more efficient. He plans to introduce proposals that would create residential parking permits, expand the experiment with “park-and-display” parking kiosks, and use technology to make it easier to process and collect fines.

And he supports efforts to computerize ticket writing to make parking enforcement officers more efficient – even if it means more tickets for him.

“I think our parking enforcement people do a great job,” he said, “and I've told them that every time I've gotten a ticket.”

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Appeals usually about the principle

The Clerk of Courts hearing officer who hears parking ticket appeals three days a week has an open mind.

“Most people wouldn't waste half a day on a \$25 or \$40 ticket unless it was the principle of the thing,” said Scott Rubenstein. “A lot of the people who come in to see me have legitimate issues, or else they wouldn't bother.”

When he does throw out a ticket, it's usually because:

■ An owner with expired tags shows they have since been renewed.

■ The meter was broken – and city maintenance records verify it.

■ The owner shows that signs were confusing, missing or faded.

Pictures help.

Take 46 Lakewood Ave. in Clifton, on a small dead end off Bishop Street. So many owners have appealed tickets there that it has its own file in Rubenstein's desk drawer.

“I'm collecting pictures of 46 Lakewood,” he said.

Pictures show the “No Parking” sign is halfway down the block. Rubenstein keeps dismissing the tickets; the officer keeps writing them.

Hardship stories may mitigate a fine, but probably won't get you off.

“I had a woman tell me she has all these issues with her eyes. She gave me some kind of medical terminology I didn't understand, and said she couldn't see the ‘No Parking’ sign about five feet away from her car. I asked her, ‘How did you drive there?’”

Appeals can go to municipal court. But only one case has been overturned in five years, records show.

Rubenstein's best advice: Feed the meter and watch the signs.

“You play roulette long enough, you're going to get caught.”

— Gregory Korte

printouts of tow lists that are so bulky most officers don't carry them. Unless they check with a police dispatcher, many cars that should be towed aren't.

Bain said he almost forgot about his ticket last month on West Eighth Street because – unlike Ohio drivers – he didn't get a notice in the mail.

The Hamilton County Clerk of Courts Office, which administers the collection of parking tickets under a contract with the city, only sends those notices to Ohio vehicle owners, and only Hamilton County residents can have their license plates held until they pay up.

Clerk of Courts Greg Hartmann said he doesn't know why out-of-state drivers aren't pursued.

The Ohio-only collection system appears to go back to when parking tickets were decriminalized in

1992. Before that, it was possible – but rare – to go to jail for a parking ticket, and parking tickets had the force of an arrest warrant.

“Governments do a terrible job at collecting money owed to them,” said Hartmann, clerk since 2002. “There's got to be a way to put our heads together and work this out.”

The Kentucky Division of Motor Vehicle Licensing will run any license plate for a law enforcement agency for a fee of \$2.

Councilman David Pepper – who himself received 27 parking tickets last year – said City Council needs to crack down on out-of-state parking scofflaws.

“That's obviously a lot of parking violators we need to track down,” said Pepper, chairman of the Law & Public Safety Committee. “We should not have a policy where people from Kentucky don't have to

pay parking tickets Ohioans have to pay. No wonder our streets are clogged.”

Kentucky drivers aren't the only ones who have figured out ways to beat the meter.

“Repeat metering” – feeding the meter beyond the maximum time limit – is illegal. But the city wrote only 19 tickets for that offense all of last year.

Unlike many other major cities, Cincinnati doesn't chalk tires in order to detect whether cars stay past the limit, usually two hours.

Parking officials acknowledge that the time limits are rampantly abused, with downtown office workers feeding a meter four or more times a day to avoid more expensive garage parking.

In one extreme example, the doorman at Northlich, a Fourth Street public relations firm, was cit-

ed in January for repeatedly pushing the “10 minutes free” button on the meters outside the office.

Lindsay Pitman, who lives downtown on the busiest ticket-writing street in the city, readily admits to feeding the meter because there's nowhere else to park. She got 51 tickets totaling \$890 last year.

“It's very frustrating,” she said.

“I'm an outstanding citizen and I live downtown. A lot of people have scurried away, but I've stayed in the city.”

“It's like they're sucking my will to live.”

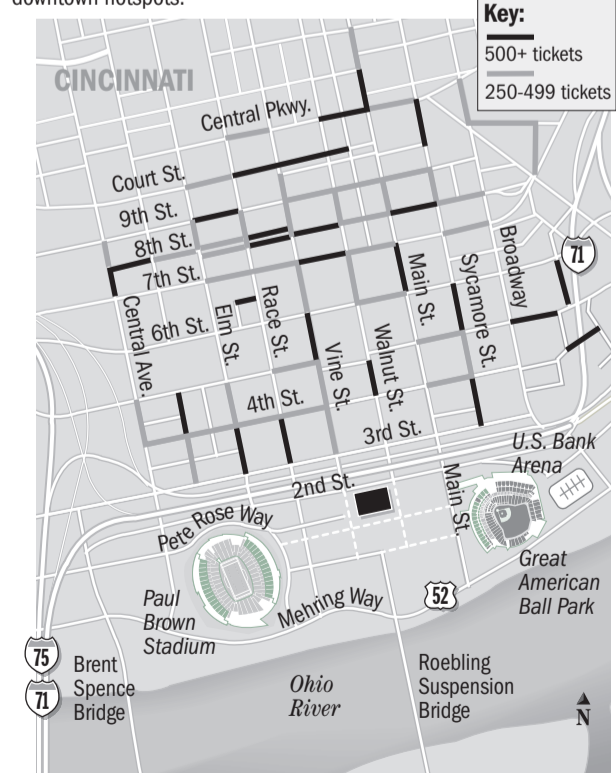
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Feeding those hungry meters

The Cincinnati Enquirer analyzed 98,243 Cincinnati parking ticket records kept by the Hamilton County Clerk of Courts, which is responsible for collecting the tickets for the city under a decriminalized enforcement system. The analysis shows who gets tickets, where they get tickets, when they get tickets, and for what offenses. In some cases, a penalty for late payment could result in one offense being counted as more than one ticket. The tickets are public record.

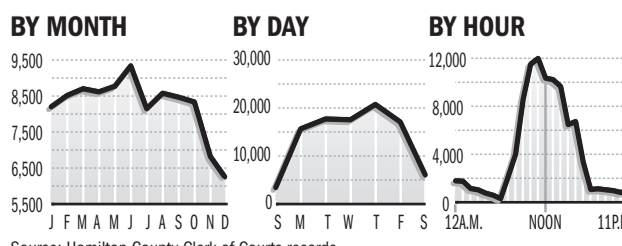
WHERE: DOWNTOWN TICKETING HOT ZONES

Not surprisingly, officers write the most tickets in locations with the most meters. The 1 and 100 blocks of East Court Street – with their diagonal parking – had the most tickets last year. In the neighborhoods, Hyde Park Square, Mount Lookout Square, Clifton Heights and the Ludlow Street district in Clifton were the most active spots for ticket-writers. Specific downtown hotspots:



WHEN: LATE MORNINGS AND THURSDAYS

Times when Cincinnati motorists are more likely to get a parking ticket:



Source: Hamilton County Clerk of Courts records

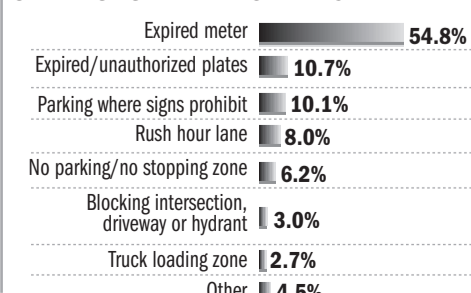
MOST COMMON OFFENSES

Most Cincinnati parking tickets are for expired meters. That was a \$14 ticket before, but City Council voted to increase the fine to \$25 beginning this year. But many drivers don't realize that parking enforcement officers will also ticket cars with expired plates – now a \$40 fine.

Offense description	2004 fine*	2005 fine	Tickets
Expired meter	\$12	\$25	53,817
Expired/unauthorized plates	\$34	\$40	10,466
Parking where signs prohibit	\$34	\$40	9,919
Rush hour lane	\$34	\$40	7,905
No parking/no stopping zone	\$34	\$40	6,109
Blocking intersection, driveway or hydrant	\$34	\$40	2,981
Truck loading zone	\$34	\$40	2,637
Parking away from curb	\$34	\$40	1,025
Parking more than 14 hours	\$34	\$40	939
Parking in bus stop	\$34	\$40	848
Across metered space line	\$12	\$25	530
Blocking intersection, crosswalk or yellow curb	\$34	\$40	335
Blocking roadway (not towed)	\$34	\$40	229
Parking in handicapped space	\$54	\$250	226
Parking with key in ignition	\$34	\$40	78
Parking truck in residential area	\$34	\$40	64
Parking taxicab outside taxi stand	\$34	\$40	27
Parking on slope without brake	\$34	\$40	22
Repeat metering	\$12	\$25	19
Trailer parking	\$34	\$44	15
Parking on narrow street	\$34	\$40	14
Blocking roadway (vehicle towed)	\$34	\$40	6
Parking in fire lane	\$34	\$40	6
Parking vehicle under repair	\$34	\$40	6
Snow emergency	\$44	\$56	5
Truck obstructing traffic	\$34	\$40	3
Blocking roadway after collision	\$34	\$40	2
Parking on highway	\$34	\$40	2
Parade route	\$34	\$40	2
Taxi on government square	\$34	\$40	1

* The actual ticket paid by parking violators before Jan. 1 was actually \$2 higher – after the Hamilton County Clerk of Courts charged a collection fee on top of the fine authorized by City Council. That fee is now included in the base fine.

OFFENSES BY PERCENTAGE



VOICES



“It's bull. I'm not going to pay the ticket. They're going to have to send a

warrant out for me.”
– David Rowland, 22, of Bond Hill, who got a \$40 ticket on Central Avenue while parked in a no-parking zone with his hazard lights on. He had run into the Cincinnati Bell office to return extra phone books for his grandmother.



“I'm downtown all the time, and I'm always plugging meters. Sometimes

you're just not having a good day. ... For \$25, I'll go ahead and pay it.”
– John Bain, 48, of Edgewood, Ky. He was visiting an Eighth Street auto repair shop and saw the officer but didn't get to his car in time.



“I forgot the meter was there. I usually shop in the suburbs, and there aren't any meters there.

That's why people would rather shop at the malls.”
– Janice Cooper, 46, of Woodlawn. She had run into a Ninth Street store “for no more than 10 minutes” when she got a \$25 ticket.

CITY'S MOST FAMOUS TICKETS

Cincinnati has written millions of parking tickets since the first meters were installed in 1941. Some become more famous – or infamous – than others:

1966: On the first day of a controversial experiment to use civilian “metersmen” to write parking tickets, a 46-year-old drunken Evanston man took a swing at a meterman writing a \$3 ticket.

Still, the experiment was a success, with metermen running out of tickets their first day.

1976: Officer Tom Lind tried to tow Councilman Jerry Springer's 1974 Cutlass Supreme, which had two unpaid delinquent parking tickets, from outside City Hall while Springer was in a council meeting. Deputy City Manager Henry Sandman ordered the car removed from the police wrecker out of councilmanic “courtesy.” Lind filed a formal grievance.

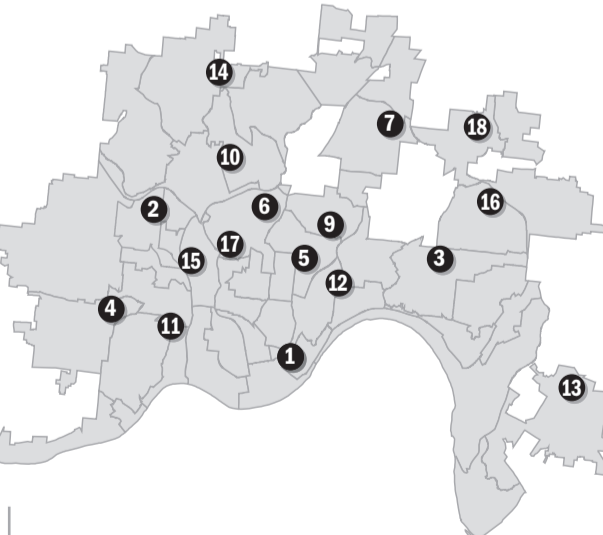
1984: Mayor Arnold L. Bortz was livid after police tried to tow his dead mother's Buick for unpaid parking tickets. Police had also ticketed Bortz's Mazda while parked in the mayor's parking space. “It's a personal thing,” Bortz said. “I imagine there are some officers who would think this would be cute.” Replied one of the officers: “If he were going to get harassed, we would have gotten 21 tickets for the week.”

1987: A furious Councilman John R. Mirisena ripped seven tickets off the cars of out-of-town downtown visitors, upset at the lack of clear signage in the “no parking” zone. The city later mailed the tickets to the vehicle owners. Mirisena offered to go to court to help the owners fight City Hall.

1988: An officer was brought up on disciplinary charges for accepting Reds tickets from the manager of the Cincinnati Reds after he wrote Pete Rose a \$29 parking ticket – on Pete Rose Way.

1996: Sylvia Stayton won international fame as the “meter-feeding granny” after being arrested for obstructing official business while feeding other people's meters in Corryville. The Ohio 1st District Court of Appeals upheld her conviction in 1998, and she eventually paid \$753 in fines and costs. She died last year.

1998: A Cincinnati police officer arrested and jailed Tonya Lamb, a 30-year-old event planner for the Greater Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, for a 6-year-old unpaid parking ticket – even after parking tickets were de-criminalized.



WHERE THE OFFENDERS LIVE

Vehicle owners with these ZIP codes get the majority of parking tickets written in the city. The top 25 ZIP codes:

ZIP	Location	Tickets	ZIP	Location	Tickets
1	45202 Downtown	4,425	14	45224 College Hill	1,890
2	45211 Westwood	3,339	*	45227 Fairfax	1,840
3	45208 Hyde Park	3,260	*	45215 Lockland	1,586
4	45238 West Price Hill	2,993	*	45240 Forest Park	1,559
5	45219 Corryville	2,751	*	45239 Colerain Township	1,510
6	45220 Clifton	2,682	15	45214 Fairmount	1,479
7	45237 Bond Hill	2,632	*	45212 Norwood	1,446
8	45231 Finneytown	2,302	16	45209 Oakley	1,442
9	45229 Avondale	2,242	17	45225 Camp Washington	1,426
10	45223 Northside	2,235	18	45213 Pleasant Ridge-Kennedy Heights	1,357
11	45205 East Price Hill	2,126	*	45236 Blue Ash	1,252
12	45206 Walnut Hills	2,031	*	45140 Loveland	1,216
13	45230 Mount Washington	1,924			

* Outside city limits

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